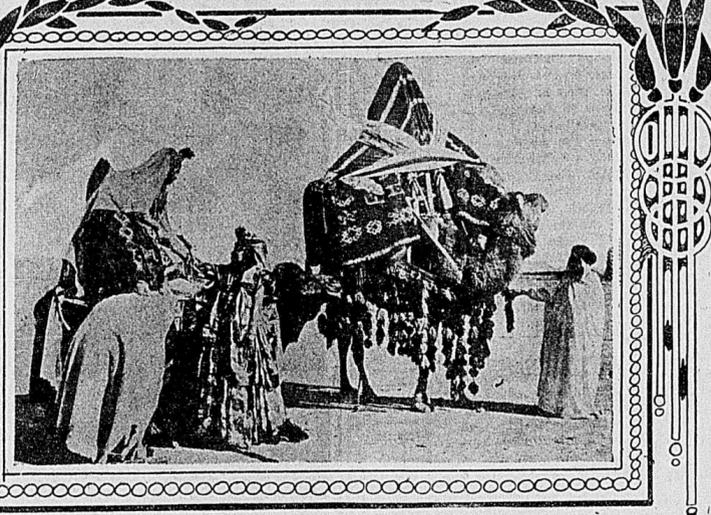


# The Christmas Eve

## PRIZE CHRISTMAS STORY.



Emily Clowes Burke



THE Persian roses had long since given their perfume to the air of the desert to refresh the weary camel-driver, and their petals to the scattering wind to heap the poet's tomb—for it was the twelfth month of the Mohammedan year in which is observed a divine institution, having for its authority the Koran:

"And proclaim to the people a pilgrimage; let them come to Thee on foot, and on every fleet camel, arriving by every deep defile.

"This do. And he that respecteth the sacred ordinance of God, this will be best for him with the Lord."

Night was passing. The stars were going out one by one, and the nightingale's song plaintive of sorrow was hushed. Murky darkness still flooded the pass guarding the approach of the desert. Dull tones from the heavy copper bells of the dromedaries quattered for the night in the far distance open, carried the signal to a rude hamlet among the hills that the caravan train would be starting ere daylight.

Arising from long and silent prayer in response to this call, two lone watchers, like those of old heeding the star of Bethlehem, stole down from an upper chamber and out into the melting gloom. Merwan, the rug-maker, was the first to break the solemn and consecrated watch.

"The night has fled and the hour is at hand, Kizami," said he to the young pilgrim, "and it is well. And thou wilt return ere the season of roses approacheth, when I must away. Aye, thou wilt return in time, for an angel voice whispered it while I yet prayed. Hasten ye Kizami, perform thy pilgrimage, and thy sins forgiven thee, ask pardon of God for mine, and it shall be granted. And oh, my young pilgrim, by the beautiful word of the holy Koran, I shall be as pure as the day I was born!"

And Merwan, in ecstasy, lifted his eyes and hands to the sky now taking on the silvery hue of the dawn.

"Thy face is even as an angel's now, my sainted Merwan, but tell me, wherein lies thy sin?"

"Ah, I have sinned, Kizami! I have had longings to remain; I have bewailed my fate to my God, and pleaded with him to make me whole, and fill my cup of human bliss; to crown my manhood, and grant unto me mine earthly heritage."

"By the sins of the fathers, given in the book of the Nestorians, is not thine earthly heritage the blight in the rose?"

"Aye, the blight in the rose visited upon me. But that is not my worst sin."

"Thy sin, then, Merwan?"

"Pleading with God for that which is not in His Koran. But haste ye, Kizami, I would see thee through the pass and on thy way."

Darkness was beginning to vanish. The lark, already amid the dawning clouds, was calling to the morn. Streaks of gray were chasing the shadows of the desert, as the sandaled feet of be-turbaned hermit and pilgrim pressed the sands of his border. Neither had spoken as they paced the trail through the high and narrow walls, to the gateway, shutting out the storm, the heat, the fear, and the dread of its immeasurable stretches.

In prayer stood Merwan with closed eyes and hands outstretched to the westward, where Kizami was about to depart on his pilgrimage. So long did the rug-maker remain motionless, that a rosy light began flooding the caravan of the hills, and Kizami, buoyant of spirit and with youth burning in his light and active body, plucked at the sleeve of the worshipper, at the same time craving his patience. Merwan gazed upon him with grave sweetness, bidding him speak.

"Merwan, I must away, yet, for mine own enlightenment, I would fain know thine earthly heritage. I will guard it as my soul."

Merwan smiled in sweet forgiveness of the other's earnestness, and about to speak, was turning his misty eyes across the sands, when he clutched the youth's arm and exclaimed:

"O, look ye!"

It was only the simple picture of a mother and child, with the dawn-shadowed plain for its back-ground, and for its halo, the rosy blush of the morning. She was riding a sturdy ass, and with veil thrown back, nursing the babe at her breast, while her husband in the characteristic rusty brown gown and white turban, was holding the bride and glancing back with fondness upon his family. The desert waste was gray and chill in the dawn, yet warm and glowing with life and devotion and breathing of fruition. It was the divine story in human characters. The story is growing old, but every century hears its mystic calling and gains new life and power. It is still and must forever be the joy of the world. Let earth rise with it, then, and live.

Shouts, hoists, grunts, pulls, tugs, shoves, kicks and punches, gave signal that loads were being lifted to the backs of animals, adjusted and tied. As quickly passed the face of that young mother beneath her impenetrable veil at sight of the two strangers, as quickly fled the deep impressiveness of the moment at the infinite variety of sound and jargon, discordant and inarticulate.

"All that is mine is thine, Kizami," said Merwan at parting.

"All? You don't mean?"

"Yes, all; save that upon which my hands are busy. The Mullah will know, and have care of that in the holy hour; but—go! Nor tarry, nor forget ye the hour of roses. Go! and God be mindful of thee. Glory to Allah!"

A moment later and the young pilgrim was in the midst of the passing caravan—a motley assembly of camels, mules, and donkeys; muleteers, pilgrims, and camel-drivers—creeping away to the westward, while in the east and over all the sun was reigning.

Far away, yet ever near, high above rolling hills and surrounding plain, loomed Noah's mountain, Ararat; crowned with clouds and robed in rosy snow, soft-tinted by the sun; lonely, grand, and solitary; "a fitting place for the resting of the ark at the solemn death hour of an older race and the birth of a new generation."

It was a holy day. Priests were praying in the mosques, pilgrims wending their way to Mecca, shepherds like those of old calling to their flocks, each one by name, as they huddled together in the open places of the snow. The winter was present, and the spring far away, yet the sunshine whiffs tempered by clouds, was imparting a touch of the soft season with its light and life and joy.

Merwan, the rug-maker, immovable as a bronze statue, gazed long to the westward till the creeping pilgrimage melted into the desert. Then back through the hills to his hamlet and loom he passed, with the bearing of a Persian prince.

"O, perfect day!" he murmured ecstatically, "wherein it is enough for me to know God's will is being done!"

The spirit of the spring was quickening in the land of the Magi. Soft gales were dissolving the mountain snows and the landscape glimmered in raiment new and radiant. In the lowlands, the peasants were turning the soil with their plows. The purring of a Persian water wheel carried the tidings of swollen rivers dispensing their blessings to valley and plain. The liquid notes of a bird floating high among the green and purple hills, thrilled the air with its joy of new-born wings, while the wild perfume of an early flower stirred the sense with its message of a second birth.

The winter had passed. All nature was throbbing with the unseen forces of immortal life.

It was the hour of midday devotion. Upon his prayer rug, with his pale forehead touching the floor, Merwan, the weaver, knelt in long and silent supplication. Within that sanctuary, where tapestries of unimaginable beauty covered the crude walls, the vast solitude of the desert seemed to abide, filled with soul and with heaven all about; populace of abundant life in light and color, cloud and mist, sun, moon, and stars, and thought companions. It was a shrine where angels might descend to watch over a soul left alone like a lamb on the plain.

A familiar step aroused the suppliant, and a Mullah, the faithful priest of the prophet, darkened the portal.

"By the heart and soul of the founder of the faith, may Allah chasten thee in pain," the holy one gave greeting and particular blessing.

"Glory to Allah! and His will be done," murmured Merwan, still prostrate.

From the Koran the Mullah chanted: "Angels come among you by day and by night; when those of the night ascend to heaven, God asks them how they left their creatures." And what of thee, Merwan, thou lone one; what answer can they give of thee—we found him in prayer, in prayer we left him!"

"By the faith of Islam, yes."

"Two angels watch upon each mortal, one on the right, one on the left. At the close of each day they fly up to heaven with a written report. Every good action is recorded ten times by the angel at the right; and if the mortal commit a sin, the same angel says to the one on the left, 'Forbear ye for seven hours to record it; peradventure, he may repent and pray and obtain forgiveness.' And what of thee, son; dost thou repent ere the seventh hour and pray?"

"Thy servant prayeth always ere the seventh hour."

"By the scrupulous cleanliness of the prophet, doth thou perform ablution before each prayer?"

"For the cleanliness of my soul, do I perform ablution for the cleanliness of my body."

"Glory to Allah!"

"Arise, thou believer, and by the heart of Mahomet, may thou knowest God's mercy."

Though pure barbarian by birth, yet with the grace and peaceful majesty of a prince, did Merwan, the rug-maker, sit before his crude loom in the doorway, weaving a wondrous fabric. His delicate, high-bred face wore an expression of aloofness from the world; his eyes, dark and deep, unfathomably deep, bespoke a soul within a sacred portal; his hair was black and curled around the rim of his snowy turban.

Upon the ground opposite, the descendant of the prophet was squatting upon his heels, seeming to muse, yet watching with wary interest the busy fingers before him.

As precious as a Persian carpet, a beautiful cat upon a footstool, like Persia revealed on the map, blinked in the sunshine; perplexed and uncertain of balance, with furry back twitching uneasily; dozing, yet wide awake, in seeming mistrust of the Mullah, even as Persia of Russia.

The stillness that followed the prayer was broken by Merwan the weaver: "While I yet prayed in the night hour, a filmy scarf veiled before me, dazzled my eyes with the brightness of its characters unto me written: 'In that hour when thy soul is gently drawn from thy pale lips as the silken veil from the face of one beloved, oh, the mystery and charm in the revelation!'"

"The Mullah started as one falling out of a dark dream, into the searching light of day. The cat shifted. The sun was not more radiant than the face above the threads, the knots, and the nervous fingers."

"By the fascinating smile of the prophet, thine is even as a ray of the spirit, shining in purity and brightness. God hath given thee this resignation ere thine hour approacheth. Blessed art thou in thy consecration!"

The cat was purring of plenty, roguery, sanctity at once interchangeable. Merwan continued the message set forth in gold letters:

"When the petals of the roses have hidden Omar's shrine, man shall envy thy quiet grave veiled beneath thine own roses woven in splendor and golden."

Merwan, the weaver, caressed his rare fabric now nearing completion.

"Aye, 'tis a thing of rare beauty," the Mullah responded, "and worthy the grave of a righteous believer."

"Thou shalt enter the golden gateway into thy heavenly Mecca, and thy soul shall be white as the wheaten flour, and fragrant with perfume. Sweeter than the spicy gales of Sabea shall the air be and cooled by sparkling fountains, and resounding with the melodious voice of that singing angel, Israfil!"

"Upon thee be peace in the name of Allah the Merciful."

Resplendent being shalt thou be, free from human grief and pain, and endowed with youth and thy beauty; and loving, aye, better after thy spiritual eyes have beheld the glories in heaven.

As for Merwan, he stroked his fond pet, and smiled a grave smile, which flickered a moment and then went out like a candle.

"O, Thou, who never sleepest, be with me this night in the shadow!"

Alone in the night, alone in his death-watch did Merwan, the rug maker, whisper:

"O, Thou, who never sleepest, be with me this night in the shadow!"

And a light went out in the land where the Star shall eclipse the Crescent.

Grandma's face was a study maternal, as she sat in the garret and pondered.

for me. Ait that mystery lurking in the desert, on the mountain, in the vines and trees and flowers, in the roses and the secret. All that stands for—Dely. His nearness and His power. All that stands for change, and the bliss of the hereafter! All is thine, Kizami, but—listen to a warning from the hand of my passing. Somewhere in a land beyond the hills there lies a strange faith. I warn thee ere the last hour of my sleep within this hamlet to—

to thee, to that far distant dwelling."

The footfall of the Mullah jarred upon the evening stillness.

"Even now His angels He sendeth down from the celestial regions," crooned the holy servant.

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"I wanteth but little to rend asunder the veil of the heavens that I may enter into that garden of roses, whose my work hands and feet may be cool among the sweet petals."

"Glory to Allah!"

When the priest spoke again, it was by the word of the Prophet that he would return before midnight. And as he departed Kizami stole into that hallowed hamlet, embracing the passing young weaver.

"God love thee, Kizami. Over my work and prayer, that blesses my work and prayer, as the sky and as precious and clear as the pool of the Prophet. To weave it among my loved roses shall be the last task of my fingers."

"May the angels precede thee and guard thee, I ask in the name of the Mighty, Kizami!"

"God love thee, Kizami, and listen; the time groweth short, by the Persian sun, but not by my clock. Heed me; a voice in the night has changed all my heart, and am I turned Christian."

"Merwan: thou wanderest."

"Yes, my Master! In the lone watches, an angel voice has been singing a sweet, strange lullaby, of love new-born, of a dimpled form born to bear the burdens of the world, and to protect it—me as the small and weak, yet leading of man; of little arms outstretched to gather in God's suffering creation. Oh, Kizami! I have felt these arms about my neck, and they are gentle, Master's drawing me; and that sweet voice the Mother, Mary, soothing me to rest."

"Nay, a Nestorian—"

"In my dying hour, I speak truth. Kizami, I have cried in my heart for more than the prophet can give. I cried till the cross wove itself into my life-work. Deep in my heart lies the secret, that blesses my work and prayer, as the sky and as precious, and clear as the pool of the Prophet to weave it among my roses shall be the last work of my fingers. Sleep in my soul lies the secret that carries me out of the darkness—the cross woven there, 'neath my roses, and so veiled that only the spiritual eye may discern it; 'neath the folds of the finest spun gold—a mystic cross o'er the crescent triumphant. Over my grave, Kizami, the Mullah will place it. But take thee all else, and King Cyrus, nor tarry."

"May the angels precede thee and guard thee, I ask in the name of the Mighty!" Kizami departed in sorrow. Alone on the mountain, alone in his hamlet, did Merwan, the weaver, whisper:

"O, Thou, who never sleepest, be with me this night in the shadow!"

Alone in the night, alone in his death-watch did Merwan, the rug maker, whisper:

"O, Thou, who never sleepest, be with me this night in the shadow!"

And a light went out in the land where the Star shall eclipse the Crescent.

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was suddenly checked in the act of hanging up a tiny stocking on a baby-ribber line drawn beneath the mantle. John the young husband, walked into the room.

"Not hanging stockings already, grandmother?"

"Aye, it wants but a week, lad," sharply.

"But we never hung up our stockings at home till the night before Christmas, and besides—why, grandmother! John's eyes fell upon a bit of silken footwear, and a rosy color mantled to the roots of his hair."

"And 'why grandmother?' I should like to know. I want to be sure that it were foot that size will be kicking in our home by Christmas. In my village hanging the stocking the week before insures good luck."

"Have you doubts, grandmother?" said the young husband, apprehensively.

"The nurse interrupted. 'Your wife is calling for you,' she said."

John disappeared. How is your patient by now? Grandma asked of the nurse.

"Quite indeed! I can't make her out. Sometimes, 'th' process's not right in her mind; yet I don't say a word, and she startles me with: 'Don't be alarmed, dear Miss Brooke, I am quite sane,' and that rare, grave smile, and the soft, tender light in those deep, dark eyes, reassures me."

Grandma smoothed out the little white robe on her lap that boasted her own hand embroidery; but she cracked to and fro very fast, and then said:

"Give an instance, Miss Brooke, in what way does she strangely impress you?"

"Well, this morning she would wash her hair—she's wifely you know—as she came from the bath, in her loose flowing robe, with a white towel wrapped about her head like a turban, with the black curls clinging around the edges and crooning some incoherent stuff—"

"Stuff! that's it exactly," Grandma broke in with her eyes all aglow like the nurse's. "It resembled a chant in its one melo-tonic, and the words—"

"Aye, the words?"

"They were foreign."

"And she looked like—" the nurse pondered.

"Yes, yes, like what?" Grandma moved to the edge of her chair.

"Like a thing oriental and not of this land."

Grandma gave a slight cry. "I knew it would come; the poor child's been marked. There! the cat's out of the bag, now. I'll have to confess, that my dearie may not be misjudged. Hish! here's John."

In the doorway, with wide staring eyes and pale face, the young husband looked quite distracted.

"She needs you, Miss Brooke," he suggested. "She's in great distress."

"The first rest she's taken in days," said the nurse.

"All I needed," she said, "was this bed of sweet roses to cool my hot head to lull me to sleep. I wonder why grandmother's withheld it so long? It's mine, you know, John."

"Is it her's?" John questioned.

"To be sure! but I never told her."

"Then how did she know?"

"The plot thickens," mused Grandma.

And why in the world has so wondrous a thing been allowed to repose in the garret?"

"To another voice of that rug."

"And is the thing haunted?" the nurse sharply asked.

"What on earth do you mean, Grandma Grey?"

"Just what I said. Mr. John, that rug has lain wrapped in the greatest of care and locked in my own chest all these years. Imagine the state of my nerves, if you will, when today I found it spread out on the attic floor."

"Then that's where my patient has been when I have missed her," exclaimed the shrewd nurse.

"Pray, how do you know—you've no proof," John spoke with excitement.

"Will you both hold your tongues and sit down, while I tell you the story?" Grandma said curtly.

"And haste lest my darling awake."

"Never fear; she'll sleep like an infant till morning. I know all the tricks of that rug."

The facial expressions of husband and nurse were peculiar.

"Rugs are not only written pages," began the wise, not to say startling, old lady; "but they live and breathe and have the sense of feeling. Not only has every color its significance, each design its hidden meaning, not only may you read wondrous things from Persian characters and wondrous verses from Persian poets, not only are the fringes of leaf forms, flowers and trees, is there contained a symbol language, but pervading all, there hovers a peculiar spirit—a mental drift—some inherent and mysterious fitness bearing the subtle truth of our marvelous nearness to the world beyond. I gained my knowledge through reading and study while in possession of that wondrous creation upstairs; some there are, however, so sensitive as to hear and hear, and see, and learn, without the aid of books or teacher."

"That costly fabric was given to my great-grandmother as a Christmas gift, hanging over the mantel, and in a poster bed, for her to muse and dream upon as she lay with her first-born—my grandmother—clasped to her breast. From that time it has passed down the line, from first daughter to first daughter, until it beheld that it be given at Christmas time, or at the advent of a daughter, whichever first followed the marriage. And strange to relate, each first birth has been a girl babe, and always happening about Christmas time with never one break."

"Were any of these mother strange before birth?" the nurse broke in.

John gasped. "Now, don't tell me my dearie is a victim of some terrible heredity!"

bearing a wedded thought that was to be brought to golden fruit in the midst of December's snow and ice. Her joy seemed not of earth, but of heaven—a spirit floating out from her.

"'Tis New Year's in the Persian land, my mother dear," she digressed as she talked the precious secret that had sent her fairly mad with joy. "It falls not in January as does ours, but in the advent of the spring. The Persians celebrate this festival in the same way as we observe our Christmas, only it continues for a whole month, and when the earth is all a-bloom with flowers. City, town, village, and hamlet let rejoice in holiday attire, and with interchange of gifts, and good wishes, and the welcoming of callers with large trays of sweets."

"You'll not have time for Persian history, by and by, I chafed her."

"The voice of my Christmas guest—as she called the rug—never silent, mother dear, I don't have to hunt in books for information."

"The force of this speech did not dawn upon me at the time. Again, one evening in the soft May dusk, Elsie said, 'I dreamt, 'twas in the night, when the Persian greets you with 'Peace be unto thee.'"

"And did your Christmas guest tell you that, my dear?"

"Yes; she frequently greets me at this sweet hour."

"He!" I exclaimed in amusement, "And has the old rug assumed the form of sex?"

"What not only sex, but soul!" she answered solemnly. "It is a presence that is not to be put by," she quoted, and for some unaccountable reason at the time, I felt troubled."

"The face of a blooming in that far land of Iran, she mused, and soon with the fields be a waving mass of white poppies."

"In October, when my Elsie was a pretty, old beautiful, and in her completeness, came the shocking tidings of Stanton's sudden death. We had been looking for him every day; it seems, he had started homeward when pneumonia claimed him for a fatal victim. Naturally, I trembled at the dire effect of such a blow to my delicate Elsie. But mine was the pain when I found that it fell as lightly upon her as the leaves of the autumn. Stanton had killed all her love for him in hours of his brutal torment, but I was also possessed of a cruel fear that a shadow lurked in the brightness of my darling's mentality."

"At this revelation John, the young husband, moaned and began to pace the floor."

"Grown, John, will you?" said Grandma, "and remember I am living it over again; it is harder on me than on you."

John obeyed.

"Stanton was never my soul companion, mother dear," Elsie reasoned in her sweet effort to calm me, nor was she deceived in the real cause of my alarm. 'Don't tremble so,' she soothed, 'and remember, an angel's sound and name.' 'I was comforted somehow, and felt that my Elsie was not only strong and brave, but mentally above me."

"Come, mother dear," she said one evening as we sat in the gloaming awaiting the coming of Christmas, and the holy hour of her consecration. "I want to tell you a sad though beautiful story." Upon the rug she seated herself and reposed the Christmas guest. A thing of beauty, but as to a joy forever—well, there it was, anyway, a creation of splendor, mastery, weaving, and dignity.

"In Persia, where there is an oriental custom, best known in Persia, of spreading a rug over a grave as we would strew flowers. Beautiful idea, isn't it? For the flowers in a rug would be as the flowers in a garden, and the children tie knots in it—that it may be expressive of the sorrow of all. Now, one dark afternoon, immediately following the death of my Elsie, I lay down upon my knees studying my rug. I found a perfect cross woven in a rose, and a strange thing happened. It was impossible, alone with it, not to talk to it, and to feel its presence, once breathing solace to my outraged heart. In my attitude of prayer before it, it seemed to shield and encompass me just like the soft folds of your loving arms about me, when at your knee I used to pray."

"What of you, little web?" I murmured softly, "more like a smiling guest you seem than a mere prayer. Were you ever sanctified, lost among the hills of Persia, with the snow whistling about door, and the sheep huddled without? Or in the garden among the roses? Did you journey by camel back to the sea coast, by the desert to the market place, or did you pass over the dead body of your rightful owner, into the keeping of some swarthy and sacrilegious priest, who asked you for foreign dollars? And from whose grave were you taken? And, mother dear, believe me, in answer to my question came a subtle fragrance of roses; a pattern of sanctified, lost among the hills of Persia, with the snow whistling about door, and the sheep huddled without? Or in the garden among the roses? 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